Socialist Worker August 1992

LABOR NEWS

Navistar

INDIANAPOLIS—Navistar, the largest U.S. truckmaker, last month announced that it would reduce its share of health care payments and cut benefits for the company's 200,000 retirees represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

The UAW filed suit in federal court August 4 to block Navistar's plans to cut $90 million in health care costs.

"Our position is we can make these changes unilaterally," said company spokeswoman Mary Moster.

Navistar, which claimed to have lost $67 million in the first half of the year, plans to charge premiums and deductibles on insurance and eliminated some benefits for retirees.

Navistar apparently wanted to take advantage of the UAW's weakness following the union's surrender in the recent Caterpillar strike.

The union's response has been tepid at best.

Bill Casstevens, the UAW's secretary-treasurer, said the union understands *"the difficult nature of Navistar's financial difficulties"* but criticized the company's decision.

"What's needed here are serious negotiations that balance the needs dictated by the company's situation with the rights and needs of the workers," Casstevens said.

The problem is that such "balancing" means sacrificing the interests of workers. □

TWA

AS THEY did many times in the 1980s, workers are being called on to sacrifice their wages to bail out a failing company.

What makes this particular case ironic is that the company is Trans World Airlines (TWA), the bankrupt air carrier.

Its chairman of the board, corporate raider Carl Icahn—a symbol of the 1980s' financial mess—Carl Icahn is being given a *"soft landing."*

TWA filed for bankruptcy protection in January. The airline is attempting to relaunch itself following a major restructuring.

The deal being negotiated in federal bankruptcy court when *Socialist Worker* went to press would have Icahn step down as TWA chairman in exchange for allowing TWA workers to gain a 45 percent stake in company equity.

Workers representing TWA's unions would agree to take a 15 percent pay cut.

The International Association of Machinists, representing 15,000 members, took the lead in offering pay concessions.

The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), representing TWA pilots, has yet to sign on. ALPA is looking for assurances that 2,800 union members' jobs will be protected if TWA is sold.

Even with the concessions, TWA will face even more pressure to cut costs to remain competitive.

And the fact that union money will "have a greater say" in determining these cuts doesn't change the fact that workers will bear the brunt of making TWA competitive again.

Icahn will lose $100 million in the deal being crafted between the unions, the bankruptcy judges and TWA management.

But that is nothing compared with the writing off of nearly $750 million in TWA debt.

And while Icahn is let off the hook, TWA workers have already been made to pay. □

Workers fight for union recognition and better wages

Justice now for California drywallers!

SAN DIEGO—Justice for Drywallers marked the second month of their strike against the southern California drywall industry on August 1.

by JOE ALLEN

The strike has escalated from a few hundred strikers in early June, to several thousand at the end of July. Most of the striking drywall workers are Mexicans.

The southern California residential construction industry, already crippled by a severe recession, has been brought to a virtual standstill.

The major demands of Justice for Drywallers include union recognition (as part of the Carpenters Union), health benefits, higher wages and safe working conditions.

A rally and march is planned on August 8 in San Diego. The rally is being organized by Justice for Drywallers and the Justice for Drywallers Support Committee.

An array of strike organizers, strike supporters and union activists are scheduled to speak, including United Farm Workers leader, Cesar Chavez.

The outcome of the drywallers' strike will have an enormous impact on the fate of low-wage, non-union workers in other industries in California.

Many of the elected leaders of the drywallers see their struggle as very much inspired by the Justice for Janitors campaign that led to the successful unionization of previously non-union, low-wage (mostly Mexican and Central American) janitors, in Los Angeles two years ago.

As one Justice for Drywallers leader recently put it, *"our strike is a chance to bring back the unions again for those who lost them or never had one."*

The Justice for Drywallers campaign began last November when a small number of drywallers—who construct the inside walls of residential houses—from Orange County, south of Los Angeles, began meeting to discuss their working conditions and prospects for unionizing.

SERIES OF DEMANDS

Contacts with other drywallers throughout southern California, from Los Angeles to San Diego, were established and a series of demands were made on the drywall companies.

The organizing effort of Justice for Drywallers is a response to the collapse of their working conditions over the last decade.

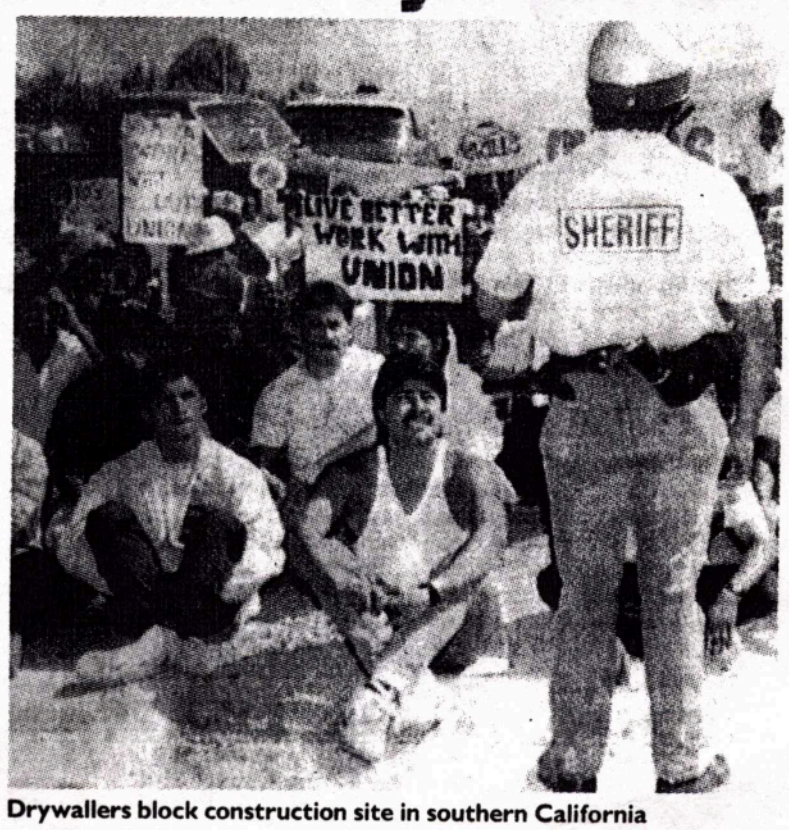
During the 1980s, conditions for construction workers deteriorated dramatically. In 1982, the Homebuilding and Drywall Associations throughout southern California successfully broke the Carpenters Union—which represented drywallers—among many of its biggest companies.

A proliferation of subcontracting took place on all residential construction sites that sharply increased the level of non-union work.

As wages and piece rates for residential construction workers, especially drywallers, deteriorated, the workforce changed from mostly Anglo workers to mostly Mexican workers.

When southern California entered recession in 1989, working conditions for drywallers became unbearable.

A few years ago, drywallers earned on average, $600 for a 40-hour week. Before the strike began, wages were down to $300 for a 60-hour week.



Drywallers block construction site in southern California

One of the most insidious aspects of the growth of non-union subcontracting has been the development of the "labor barons" or "brokers" who recruit Mexican workers and supply them to the subcontractors.

A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* described the role of the labor barons:

"The labor barons acted as go-between for the companies and the men. Often, the men say, cheated them.

"And the barons often paid in cash, cheating the government out of income taxes, Social Security and workers' compensation payments too.

"The men had no benefits, no health insurance, no vacations, while the barons drove Mercedes-Benzes and lived in big homes."

Some of the drywall companies are small fly-by-night operations. Others are multi-million dollar corporations, like Great Western Drywall owned by Joe Sayatovich, one of the richest men in California.

When these employers dismissed the demands of Justice for Drywallers, a strike was called for June 1. □

Drywallers stand up to intimidation and attacks

JUSTICE FOR Drywallers have an elected leadership, independent of the Carpenters Union, for each of the strike areas—Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernadino and San Diego counties—that meets each week to discuss the state of the strike.

Meetings are held almost daily in each of the county strike headquarters to organize the daily picketing and to discuss other issues.

Though the strike began with its largest numbers in Orange County, it spread quickly throughout the region. The strike has been spread by roving pickets.

Each day at 4:00 a.m., 150 to 200 strikers gather at the strike headquarters in San Diego and move out to work sites where scabs have been recruited to do drywall work.

While most residential construction sites have been brought to a virtual standstill, many of the large companies have been recruiting scabs from out of state to work on struck sites.

On numerous occasions, strikers have convinced scabs to leave the job sites and join the Justice for Drywallers movement.

Food and financial support from a variety of Mexican social, cultural and political rights groups has been crucial for the strikers and their families.

Financial contributions have prevented many of the strikers and their families from being evicted from their homes and apartments.

TAKEN BY SURPRISE

The self-organization of Justice for Drywallers has taken the employers by complete surprise.

It was conventional wisdom that low-wage, mostly Spanish-speaking workers could never organize, never strike and never hold out.

But these workers have done just that—and their resolve has gotten stronger.

Some of the small to medium-sized drywall companies have now signed agreements with Justice for Drywallers, but the vast majority still hope to starve strikers into submission.

At the same time as the employers hope that economic pressure will bring the strike to an end, they are also employing some of the oldest methods in the employers' handbook on how to break strikes: racism, intimidation, media lies and police repression.

While Justice for Drywallers' activists are very successful at convincing Mexicans who have been recruited to scab, the employers have hired a hard-core of racist Anglo workers to do carpentry, framing and roofing on the construction sites.

At one Justice for Drywallers picket line in San Diego, a racist scab yelled out: *"It takes twenty of you Mexicans to do the work of one white man."* Another scab pulled a shotgun on strikers at another San Diego work site.

The companies have also hired private security companies known for their strike breaking abilities, particularly Pinkerton, to guard the work sites and intimidate strikers.

HAND IN GLOVE

The local police forces, county sheriff's departments and the Border Patrol have escalated their level of violence and intimidation as the strike has spread through southern California.

On July 3, over 150 strikers were arrested after they occupied a work site in Mission Viejo (Orange County) to prevent scabs from working.

The police attempted to charge strikers with kidnapping, but this was dropped in favor of trumped-up vandalism charges. They were given heavy bail and it took two weeks to get the last of them out of jail.

At the end of July in Los Angeles, police arrested over 70 strikers after they attempted to stop traffic near a struck work site. Police chased and beat strikers putting 36 in the hospital.

In San Diego, police officers have called strikers "wetbacks" and tell them that *"if you don't like the law here . . ."* and point in the direction of Mexico.

While the majority of Justice for Drywallers are U.S. citizens or resident aliens, more than a small number are undocumented.

The Border Patrol has systematically harassed, arrested and deported a number of strikers as a way to break the strike.

As one striker said: *"As long as we were quiet and worked for nothing, the Border Patrol did nothing.*

"Now that we are on strike they show up at picket lines and threaten us, but we are not scared of them anymore."

LIES AND INSINUATIONS

Except for an individual writer or columnist, the local newspapers and television stations have systematically reprinted the lies and insinuations of the employers and the police about the strike.

Justice for Drywallers' strikers have been accused of setting fire to construction sites, vandalism, carrying firearms and attacking scabs without provocation—without a shred of evidence.

Despite these odds, the Justice for Drywallers strike movement is stronger today than at the beginning of the strike. But much more needs to be done in order to win a clear victory.

Individual unions have made financial contributions and the AFL-CIO has recognized the Justice for Drywallers' strike as an "official" strike.

However, active union support on the picket line has been absent. And it is an open secret that a number of scabs are members of the Carpenters Union, working despite union protests.

At a meeting of the San Diego Labor Council in late July, a motion put forward to have the council contribute $5,000 to the strike was put off for further consideration.

The labor movement must be won to supporting Justice for Drywallers' movement actively and financially.

The recent strike victory by Teamsters in Pittsburgh demonstrates that solidarity can bring victory.

Only in this way can unionists live up to the slogan of Justice for Drywallers—¡Sí Se Puede! Yes We Can! □

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Joe Allen 10/15/18

Strike of mostly Mexican drywallers in California enters fourth month

Victory for drywallers could help turn around last decade's defeats

SAN DIEGO, Calif.—Several thousand mostly Mexican drywall workers organized demonstrations and pickets to stop scabs as their strike against the southern California's drywall industry entered its fourth month.

by JOE ALLEN

The strike is an important fight for union rights and against poor wages and working conditions.

Justice for Drywallers, the name the strikers adopted at the beginning of the strike, is demanding union recognition and better wages, working conditions and health benefits.

The strike remains strong, but the strikers will have to completely stop scabbing at the construction sites and continue to win active support from the union movement—particularly from the carpenters union.

The possibility of winning more support from the labor movement is good.

On August 8, over 500 members and supporters of Justice for Drywallers held a solidarity rally and march in San Diego.

Supporters from the carpenters union, the Service Employees International Union, the San Diego Labor Council, the California Immigrant Workers Association, the painters union, the ironworkers union, and the Justice for Drywallers Support Committee gave greetings.

At its August meeting following the rally, the San Diego Labor Council voted to donate money to the strike.

STOPPING THE SCABS

The prospects for stopping the scabs is also very good.

In mid-August, after several days of picketing and discussions, workers recruited to scab at a Champion drywall site in Anaheim, Calif. were convinced by strikers to down tools.

Some of these workers have joined the Justice for Drywallers movement, and the bus used to transport scabs to the work site has not returned.

However, a small but important amount of work is still getting done.

In San Diego county, the employers have rented trucks and motor homes to transport scabs to work sites protected by police escorts.

But San Diego drywallers are not letting this prevent them from trying to talk to workers who are crossing the picket lines.

On August 14, strikers followed a truck load of scabs back to the Great Western Drywall office after work.

Great Western managers locked the scabs and themselves in their office for several hours to prevent strikers from talking to the scabs.

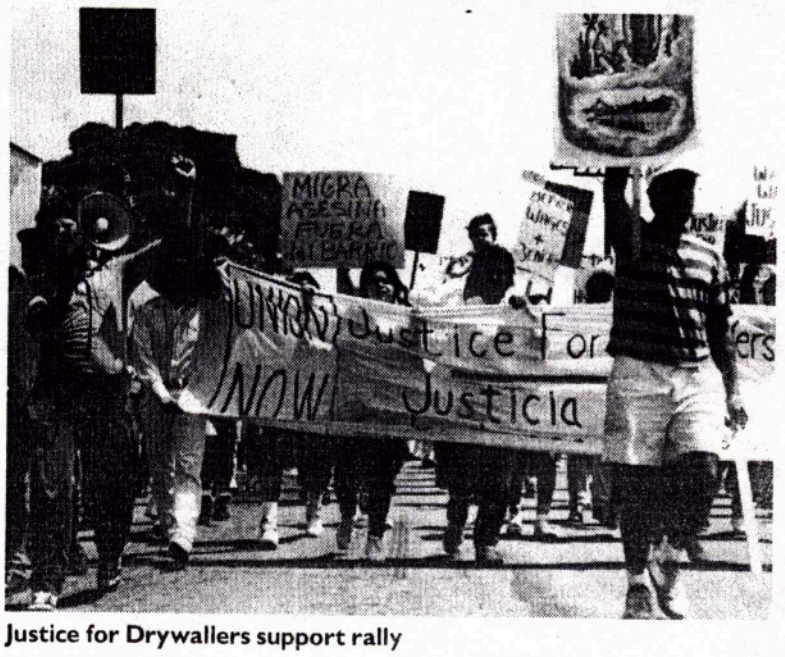
Last month, over 100 strikers and supporters twice picketed the San Diego Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) office, which is used as a hiring hall for scabs.

The ABC office was shut down for several hours on both occasions.

These are important steps toward winning the strike.

A further significant step would be convincing the carpenters union to actively support the strike.

Workers recruited to scab at a Champion work site in Anaheim were convinced by strikers to down tools. Some of these workers have joined Justice for Drywallers—and the bus used to transport scabs to the work site has not returned.



Justice for Drywallers support rally

While the union has provided the use of their facilities for organizing and helped with fundraising, it has also maintained a hands-off approach to organizing on the ground.

"We have to keep our distance" is the typical response from union officials—even though the strikers are demanding to be recognized as members of the carpenters union!

This is a serious weakness in the strike. It is an open secret that some of the people working on the struck residential construction sites are laid-off union members.

These workers must be won back to the union.

The regional drywallers strike should be taken up by the carpenters union as an opportunity to re-unionize a whole section of the construction industry that was lost during the union-busting era of the 1980s.

PICKET EVERY DAY

Despite the best efforts of the companies to stop them, hundreds of drywallers every day picket residential construction sites all over southern California.

However, employer violence and police harassment continues.

On August 11, at a work site in San Diego, a supervisor for J&S Builders, one of the struck drywall companies, drew a gun and fired into the ground near a picket line.

The San Diego police arrested the supervisor—but also arrested four drywallers on trumped-up charges of vandalism and assault.

Hundreds of people converged on the local police station to protest the arrest of the strikers.

The charges against the strikers were dropped later. But police also dropped charges against the J&S supervisor, even though dozens of witnesses saw him draw his weapon and fire.

Despite company violence and police harassment, the strikers continue to win support.

Strike supporters in Los Angeles and San Francisco are forming solidarity committees; a statewide tour of strikers is being discussed.

Much more has to be done. The Justice for Drywallers strike, if victorious, could be a small but key step in turning around a decade of defeats for the labor movement.

A victory for the drywallers will be a victory for us all! □

Send donations and messages of support to: Drywallers Fund, P.O. Box 232713, Encinitas, CA 92023. Make checks payable to: Antonio Hernandez (memo: Drywallers Fund).

"If we can win, it will be everyone's victory"

THE STRIKE of drywallers in southern California remains solid after four months. *BILL ROBERTS* spoke with *TONY HERNANDEZ*, an organizer for Justice for Drywallers, about the issues involved.

WHAT IS your position in Justice for Drywallers and what role did you play in forming the organization?

MY MAIN role is as a spokesperson and organizer.

We are trying to get a union contract. We started the strike on June 1, but we've been meeting and planning since November of last year. This had been cooking for eight or nine months already.

The Janitors for Justice [who conducted a successful strike in Los Angeles in 1990] helped by letting us use the movies of their strike.

This gave us some ideas for how to get started.

The key issue was the lack of health care benefits. Also, [we had] no security or safety on the job. And also low wages.

These were the main reasons we went on strike. We are making less money today than we were making back in 1979.

We want union recognition. We want health benefits and a pension plan. More than anything else we want to be represented.

The companies have been ripping us off for the past 15 years.

WHAT HAS BEEN the reaction of the construction companies?

THEY'VE HAD different reactions. We're organized all the way from Ventura County—which is about 400 miles from here [San Diego] to the border with Mexico.

San Diego is anti-union. Because of the border they import labor from Mexico. They also get people from other states.

The main issue is the labor brokers. They work together with the companies.

These labor brokers they hire their own people and they pay them whatever they want and they pocket the rest as profit.

So even if the contractor says he is paying fair wages—and some probably are—we never see those fair wages come into our pockets. The brokers get in between.

They couldn't believe it when we put up pickets. Because we are mostly Hispanic, they couldn't believe the cheap laborers were standing up for their rights. The same thing happened for the Justice for Janitors.

WHAT ABOUT the reaction of the police to your strike?

THE POLICE is the biggest issue right now.

If it wasn't for the police we could be 90 percent successful—with a contract in our pockets.

But now the police are helping the scabs get into the job sites. Our people are arrested for no reason at all.

They manipulate the system. They make sure the rich people keep making the money and the poor people stay poor.

The mayor of San Diego is one of the richest women in the country so her side is well represented by the police.

WHAT KIND of support are the drywallers getting from the Carpenters' Union?

THEY GIVE us moral support and they let us use their facilities. Besides that they are donating money through the AFL-CIO strike fund.

How much are they donating? I don't know. I have no idea about that.

All I know is that we needed a place to gather and they let us borrow their place here and throughout southern California.

Without these halls, things would have disintegrated.

ARE YOU getting any help from other construction unions?

I BELIEVE others are donating through the AFL-CIO fund.

Because of law suits pending against us, none of the unions want to claim 100 percent support because they might be responsible for any losses.

There is also a lot of racism involved at the work sites. We're Latinos and some of the Anglos—not all—are trying to create a situation and make it worse by using racism.

WHAT ABOUT other support for the strike?

HERE WE have the Drywaller Support Committee.

We have CIWA (California Immigrant Workers Association), the Mexican National Brotherhood, and an institution of lawyers which help us with discrimination and immigration problems.

We have support from both the universities here in San Diego. Churches and other organizations—too many to remember them all—are helping.

Support is getting bigger every day.

HOW IS morale holding up and how are the families coping with the sacrifices of the strike?

WELL, WE have our ups and downs. We are supported through the strike funds collected for us, and when we can pay people, the morale goes high for a couple of weeks.

Then through the middle of the month when situations get so desperate and no money or food is coming in, our spirits go down.

But we have more good days than bad days.

Every morning we meet with strikers and organize to go to a job site.

We also have meetings every Friday and Saturday with the rest of the groups from Los Angeles, Orange County, San Bernadino, Riverside, Ventura, and so forth.

At least once a week we are meeting with the rest of the movement.

If anyone wants to help they should give us a call and if other drywallers need help we will send some people over.

AT THIS stage of the strike what do you think is the key to winning?

THE KEY is sticking together.

If we can stay together for another month, I don't think the companies are going to be able to keep up their financing.

They are losing a lot of money.

They are paying for a lot of security guards, for a lot of scabs from out of the state, and we are stopping them anytime we have a chance.

I would say construction is about 40 percent from the pace they are supposed to be doing it.

The general contractors and developers are putting pressure on the drywall companies to get the jobs done.

Also, I understand some of them are getting sued because they haven't complied with their contracts.

Put one and one together and I don't think they have that kind of money to keep us away from the job.

I'll tell you something, there is a lot of work here. In San Diego there are about 35 job sites now—big ones.

HOW CAN people help the strike who are not directly involved?

ANY KIND of donations are helpful—food, diapers, money, anything.

We just want the American people to realize if we win it's not just the Latinos' victory but everyone's victory.

Our victory will show up in everybody else's work. Everybody will have the right to fight for a union contract, for benefits, for a pension plan, for everything. □

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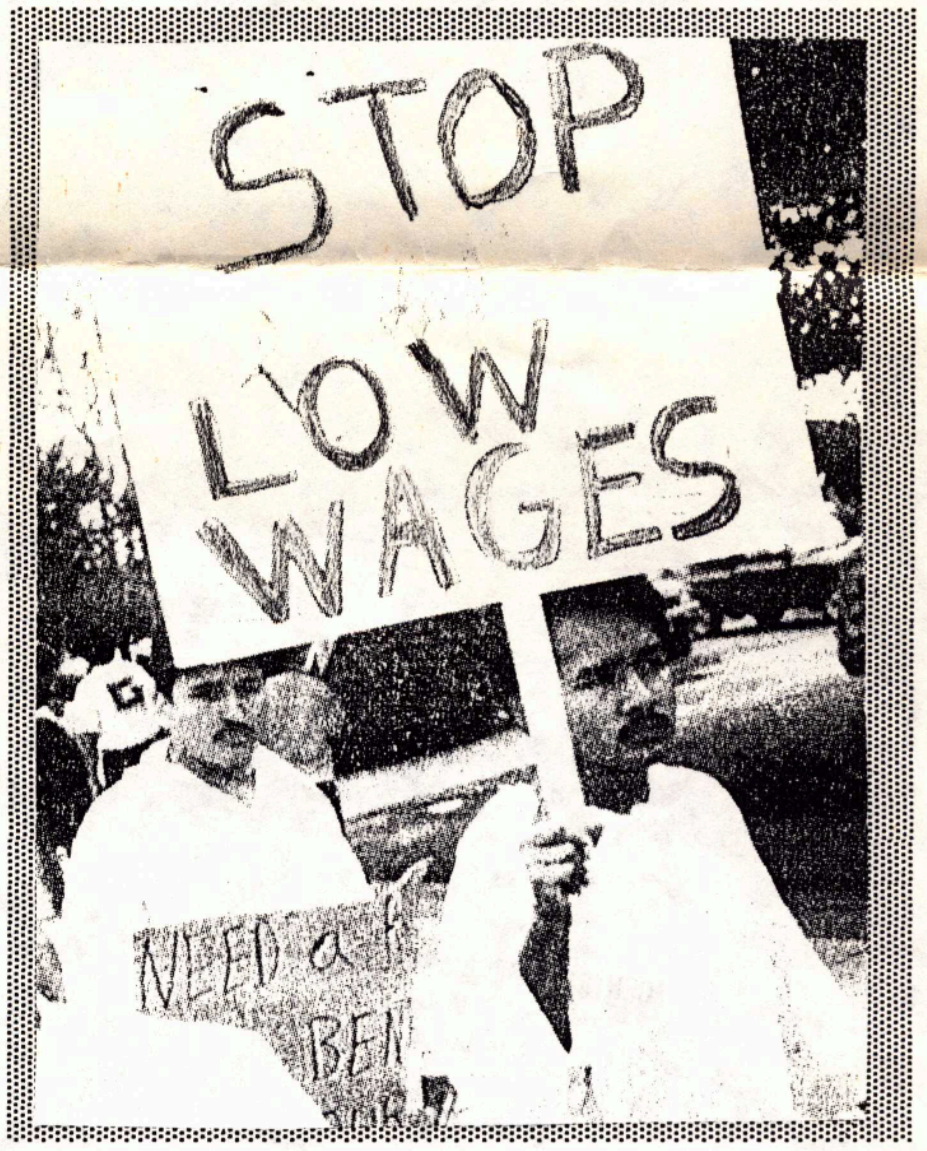
TODAY!

SUPPORT THE DRYWALLERS STRIKE!

Over one thousand Mexican Drywall workers are on strike through out southern California. They have effectively closed down almost all residential home construction from Los Angeles to the border.



These previously non-union workers are demanding union recognition, a living wage and benefits to cover themselves and their families.

They have faced racist abuse from their employers, harassment from the police and the Border Patrol, and lies spread about them in the media.

Come hear **Tony Hernandez** , a rank-and-file spokesperson for the San Diego **Justice for Drywallers** campaign, to discuss the history of their struggle and what we can do to support them.

Thursday July 23 1:00 P.M.
Santa Barbara Rm. Price Center - UCSD

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